



Praxis Paper 10

# NGO Leadership Development

*A Review of the Literature*

By John Hailey



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# NGO Leadership and Development: *A Review of the Literature*

John Hailey

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## Introduction

NGO leaders often face extraordinary challenges – both at a personal and organisational level. They work long hours with limited resources in uncertain and volatile political and economic circumstances to help the most marginalised and disadvantaged members of their communities. The complex managerial challenges they face have been documented in a small, but growing, body of research (Smillie, 1995; Fowler, 1997; Eade, 2000; Lewis, 2001; Smillie & Hailey, 2001; Edwards & Fowler, 2002; Hailey & James, 2004; James et al., 2005). Reviewing this literature one can but conclude that these challenges are demanding, and distinct from those faced by governments or the for-profit sector.

NGO leaders often face extraordinary challenges – both at a personal and organisational level

NGO leaders are often isolated and unsupported. There is talk of a leadership deficit, because of the shortage of talented leaders and the growth of the non-profit sector generally. As a result there is some urgency in attempts to develop a new generation of leaders, and to provide relevant support to existing and future leaders. Leadership development programmes designed for NGO leaders must as a consequence incorporate best practice and current experience rather than rehashing tired, traditional approaches to leadership training.

This Praxis Paper examines the role of leaders and leadership in NGOs. It draws on the analysis of recent research into the characteristics of NGO leaders, and explores the challenges of designing leadership development programmes appropriate to the needs of NGOs. This paper identifies the elements of successful leadership development, and assesses the skills or competencies that need be developed.

# 1 Perspectives on Leadership

## 1.1 Definitions

There are a wide range of definitions of the concept of leadership and the role of a leader. Dictionary definitions identify a leader as one that provides guidance by going in front, or causes others to go with them. Leadership is defined as the capacity to lead. In a recent review of leadership theory Northouse (2004) identified four common themes that run through much of leadership theory: 1) leadership is a process; 2) leadership involves influence; 3) leadership occurs in a group context; 4) leadership involves the attainment of goals. Based on this analysis leadership was defined as *'a process whereby an individual influences a group or individuals to achieve a common goal'*. But it is clear that no one definition encapsulates all the facets of leadership. Consequently we must accept there will be a range of different interpretations and perceptions of leadership and what leaders do.

### Leaders and Leadership: Some Alternative Perceptions

Leadership is ...

- *'the art of mobilising others'*
- *'the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because s/he wants to do it'*
- *'getting things done through other people, willingly'*

Leaders ...

- *'empower others'*
- *'leverage more than their own capability'*
- *'articulate visions, embody values and create an environment within which things can be achieved'*
- *'shape and share a vision which gives point to the work of others'*
- *'are best when they barely know that s/he exists'*
- *'with the best of leaders, when the work is done, the project completed, the people will say "we did it ourselves"'*

Another way of trying to identify the different elements of leadership is to create a typology of different kinds of leadership. This typology is derived from the research reviewed in this paper, and outlines four different types of NGO leader: 1) Paternalistic; 2) Activist; 3) Managerialist; and 4) Catalytic.

1. **Paternalistic** leaders typically demonstrate a patriarchal or matriarchal style of leadership. Their approach is often built on established personal or kinship relationships. They can inspire great loyalty, and have strong, close, possibly even a familial relationship with staff and volunteers. But to outsiders they can appear

autocratic, reliant on hierarchical ways of working or top-down organisational structures, and overly-dependent on traditional relationship which may not be sustainable in the long run.

2. **Activist** leaders are actively engaged in advocacy and lobbying work. They are highly motivated, often charismatic, and typically focused on a single issue. They have the ability to channel the anger or concerns of local communities and solidarity groups to achieve political imperatives. In practice they energise and inspire 'followers' with clearly articulated messages – sometimes at the expense of dealing with more mundane managerial or organisational issues.
3. **Managerialist** leaders are rated for their managerial and administrative abilities. They typically demonstrate an instrumental ability to manage organisations, and can effectively establish reliable systems and appropriate structures, as well as manage a diverse workforce with established roles and responsibilities. While they may not be comfortable with change or coping with diverse partners and external stakeholders, they demonstrate a 'professional' approach to development, have a track record in raising funds, meeting deadlines and undertaking commissions as a 'contractor'.
4. **Catalytic** leaders typically act as strategic catalysts within the NGO context, and have the ability to promote and implement change. They demonstrate a wider world-view, and the capacity to take a longer-term strategic view while balancing tough decisions about strategic priorities with organisational values and identity. Their success as change agents depends on their ability to delegate work to talented colleagues, so freeing time to engage actively with external stakeholders and partners, build coalitions and strategic alliances, and be involved in a variety of networks.

The value of such a typology is that it goes beyond simple definitions and gives an insight into the variety of different leadership styles around. The typology highlights the complexity of trying to identify the characteristics of successful leaders – if only because, in their own ways, each of these different leadership types is successful in the particular context in which it operates. However, as will be explored later, the 'catalytic' leadership type is more likely to generate longer-term, sustainable, strategic growth than the others.

## **1.2 Leadership or Management**

While the terms 'leadership' and 'management' are commonly used interchangeably, many theorists distinguish between them. 'Leaders' are expected to provide strategic direction and inspiration, initiate change, encourage new learning, and develop a distinct organisational culture, while 'managers' are seen to plan, implement and monitor on a more operational and administrative level. As a consequence there is a perception that management is concerned with resolving specific issues and day-to-day challenges, while leadership is about the big picture and promoting change. The

reality is that those people with responsibility to ensure that plans are implemented, systems are effective, and staff motivated are both leaders and managers. This overlap of roles is particularly apparent in smaller organisations where one person often has to play both roles simultaneously.

In practice leadership and management are integral parts of the same job. Both these activities need to be balanced and matched to the demands of the situation. Leadership is not just restricted to top management. Leadership skills are needed at a departmental and team level. Middle managers are commonly team or project leaders, and as such are crucial to the successful implementation of new strategies. Consequently any analysis that makes a clear distinction between managers and leaders can be misleading. Effective leaders have to demonstrate some managerial skills, and good managers display leadership qualities. There is no rigid formula as to the degree that these skills or attributes are used or displayed. In practice it depends on the judgement of the individual involved and the context in which they find themselves.

### **1.3 Leadership Traits, Styles and Competencies**

Our attitude to, and understanding of, leadership has developed and evolved over time. Early thinking about leadership has been influenced by the belief that leadership was innate and that some individuals were born with certain traits that made them effective leaders. This led to much interest in the personality and charisma of what came to be known as 'heroic leaders'. Researchers assumed that it would be possible to identify and isolate a definitive list of leadership traits (Stogdill, 1974). This ambition has never really been fulfilled. But a review of the research on leadership traits suggests that leaders score higher in such areas as ability (intelligence, relevant knowledge, verbal facility), sociability (participation, co-operativeness, popularity), and motivation (initiative and persistence).

However, this emphasis on leadership traits was open to the criticism that it underplayed or overlooked the influence of external factors. For example, there was

There was interest in the way leaders adapted their public persona and leadership style to suit the situation they found themselves in or the people with whom they were involved

concern that the focus on the individual was at the cost of an understanding of the impact of distinct organisational cultures on the way different leadership styles evolved and developed. In the 1970s researchers therefore began to focus their attentions on what leaders did in practice and how organisations shaped different leadership styles,

rather than attempting to identify or measure leaders' underlying characteristics or traits. In particular, researchers were interested in the way leaders adapted their public persona and leadership style to suit the situation they found themselves in or the people with whom they were involved (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; Mintzberg, 1998).



In the 1980s there was renewed interest in those leaders who actively promoted organisational change. Arguably such transformational leaders enabled ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results (Peters & Waterman, 1982; Bass, 1985). In some ways this was a return to the trait-based analysis of the 'heroic leader' with its focus on a leader's ability to communicate and inspire, or act as a catalyst for change. Interestingly in the late 1990s there was a reaction against this approach, partly because only a few of such transformational leaders achieved sustainable success and partly because as organisations became flatter, more decentralised, and less bureaucratic their leaders needed a new skill-set based around networking, negotiation, delegation and team building. This reaction is reflected in recent research that endorses the value of 'quieter', humbler, less charismatic leaders who are keen to be seen to be part of a broader management team and actively encourage others to succeed (Bennis & Nanus, 2004). In a similar vein Mintzberg (2006), drawing on his work with local leaders in enterprise development agencies in West Africa, argues that the future lies with 'fostering' a new generation of leaders who can practise what he refers to as 'engaging management'. Such leaders have the ability to engage with or inspire others through their thoughtfulness and humility.

Whatever the ebb and flow of researchers' interest in leadership there seems to be an ongoing fascination with efforts to identify the key characteristics and core competencies of successful leaders. In particular, interest has focused on the role and importance of individual competencies. Such competencies are seen as distinct from

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general skills in that they are considered to be the underlying characteristics found in any individual that lead to, or are causally related to, effective or superior performance. This interest has led to what is now referred to as the 'competency approach' to leadership.

The development of the competency approach is partly the result of the growing interest among organisations as to how to attract talent and how best to identify and recruit a new generation of leaders. It is also partly driven by the needs of those involved in designing and running leadership development programmes who want to identify the skills, competencies and capabilities that they should be trying to encourage and develop. The interest in this approach reflects a desire to identify and harness the leadership competencies and management skills that lead to effective performance. This has resulted in organisations, and human resource specialists in particular, placing great emphasis on measuring, monitoring, appraising and comparing core competencies. As a consequence they have created a range of typologies or frameworks which identify the mix of skills and competencies needed<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of such typologies or frameworks can be found on the following websites:

- CEML Framework of Management and Leadership Abilities [www.managementandleadershipcouncil.org/](http://www.managementandleadershipcouncil.org/)
- Investors in People Leadership and Management Model [www.investorsinpeople.co.uk](http://www.investorsinpeople.co.uk)

However, this emphasis on measurement and ranking may be at the cost of valuing less tangible leadership behaviours such as intuition or good judgement (Bolden & Gosling, 2006)

While these competency-based typologies commonly paint a picture of leaders as multi-talented individuals, there is some concern that they under-play the negative aspects of strong leadership and over-idealise the role and character of strong leaders. The impact of 'bad' or incompetent leaders must not be ignored or overlooked. The downside of strong leaders is that they can exploit their power for their own benefit or agenda. Their central role leads to a degree of dependency among their staff that in turn may lead to their disempowerment and de-skilling. Such strong leaders have been characterised as out of touch with reality, inflexible, egocentric, and isolated. This in turn can lead to poor judgement, abuse of power, confusion between personal and organisational interests, and corrupt and unethical behaviour (Kellerman, 2004).

Such poor performance or unethical behaviour can threaten the viability, credibility and sustainability of any organisation. In the context of the non-profit sector these concerns highlight the importance of identifying appropriate leadership competencies that reflect the values of the sector and the needs of individual staff and volunteers. They also suggest that one should be cautious about becoming over-reliant on mechanistic competency frameworks – in particular those that don't incorporate intangible personal competencies such as how personal judgement is applied, and how personal relationships with teams, colleagues and 'followers' develop.

## **1.4 Followers and Teams**

Despite this concentration on the character and competencies of successful leaders, many researchers and commentators argue that you cannot understand the dynamic

Many argue that you cannot understand the dynamic role of a leader unless you see it in the context of their relationship with their 'followers'

role of a leader unless you see it in the context of their relationship with their 'followers' (colleagues, subordinates, or team members). Such 'followers' can play a crucial role in reinforcing the power of individual leaders, influencing their behaviour, and helping construct internal systems and structures that act to enhance the status of those they see playing a leadership role (Howell and Shamir, 2005). The

success of most leaders is determined in part by the resources, energy, expertise and knowledge that such 'followers' can muster. Leaders can attempt to control or manipulate them through fear or coercion, but more often than not, they have to work with their 'followers' or colleagues in an egalitarian and co-operative manner.

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- EFQM Business Excellence Model [www.efqm.org/](http://www.efqm.org/)
  - Senior Civil Service Competency Framework [www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/civilservice/scs/competences](http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/civilservice/scs/competences)

Appreciation of the influential role of such 'followers' is critical in informing our understanding of the socialisation process that shapes the leadership style adopted.

This relational or team-based approach to leadership is supported by the concept of 'distributed leadership', in which there is a shared sense of purpose and ownership of issues at all levels of the organisation. This concept suggests that leadership is a collective task based on shared decision-making and delegated authority. Leadership is therefore a social process in which everyone is engaged. As such leadership development should be seen as an investment in building human capital and developing the 'collective capacity' of organisation members to 'interact and work together in a meaningful way' (Day, 2001). As will be explored in the following sections this emphasis on leadership as a collective process, rather than something that is specific to one individual, means that leadership development is as much about how best to manage teams and delegate authority, as it is about building networks and maintaining good personal relationships. It should be seen as an investment in building the social capital of an organisation.

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These different theories and concepts of leadership provide insights into the different facets of individual leaders and the dynamics of leadership. We can only conclude that leadership is a complex phenomenon. It is also something we need to understand and develop because of its crucial role in mobilising resources and motivating people. This is particularly true for many civil society organisations (including NGOs and community-based organisations). For too long capacity builders have neglected the key role that local NGO leaders play in the development process, and overlooked the complex and collective dynamics of leadership within many NGOs. They appear to have underestimated the influence of the particular culture and context in which many NGO leaders operate, and as a result many capacity building initiatives designed to support a new generation of NGO leaders have been inappropriate and irrelevant.

## 2 NGO Leaders: Context and Culture

This section focuses on the evolving role of NGO leaders and the way the environment in which they work impacts on this role. It draws on research from a variety of sources, and sees leadership in the particular cultures and contexts in which NGOs operate. What is clear from this research is that not only do individual leaders play a central role in shaping the destiny of many NGOs, but that their role and effectiveness is in part determined by the environment in which they work (Kelleher & McLaren, 1996, Fowler, 1997, Smillie & Hailey, 2001, Hailey & James, 2004, James et al. 2005).

There are also worries about the lack of leadership talent to be found within the context of the non-profit sector as a whole. This 'leadership deficit' will become a matter of urgency as the sector expands over the next twenty years. It is estimated that in the US alone over half a million new senior managers will have to be developed for leadership positions in the period 2007–2016. What is also apparent is that many of these jobs will be filled by individuals recruited from outside the sector who will have had limited experience of running non-profits at a senior level.

Not only do individual leaders play a central role in shaping the destiny of many NGOs, but their role and effectiveness is in part determined by the environment in which they work.

Currently it is estimated that only 40 per cent of senior management positions in US non-profits are filled by internal appointments, and that the remainder are recruited externally (Tierney, 2006).

In the 1990s the International Forum on Capacity Building, which was an international coalition of NGOs concerned with building the organisational and managerial capacity of the sector as a whole, consistently voiced its concerns at the quality and availability of appropriate leadership. It argued strongly for increased investment to develop a new generation of NGO leaders (1998 and 2001). CIVICUS, an international alliance of civil society organisations, similarly identified the lack of NGO leadership talent as a matter of particular concern. It suggested that this was partly a consequence of the rapid turnover of senior staff and the difficulty in replacing them, and that NGOs needed to do more to recruit and retain effective leaders (CIVICUS, 2002).

Unfortunately much of our understanding of the way leaders work and what motivates them is based on research into the role and character of leaders in the business, political or military sectors. Furthermore, much of this research is based on studies in the developed industrialised countries of the North, with a particular focus on the individualistic, low power distance cultures of North America or Europe (Kotter, 1996, Adair, 2002, Bennis & Nanus, 2004). Relatively little research has been undertaken on leadership in the non-profit or public sector, and what research there is has mainly been based on the experience of US non-profits and has focused on the work of Boards rather than individual leaders. Allison (2002) reviewed the number of

books concerned with non-profit management carried by Amazon.com, and estimated that only about 10 per cent were concerned with non-profit leadership – virtually all of which were based on the US experience and were concerned with Board and Governance issues.

Much of the current leadership research is therefore not relevant to the different social, cultural and political environments in which NGO leaders work (Hailey & James, 2004). The INTRAC Praxis programme is trying to address this gap (see the range of Praxis Papers and Notes in this area: e.g. James et al. 2005, James, 2005 a, b and c, Symes, 2006). While NGO-specific research and writing on leadership may be in short supply, it does exist and is growing. Some of the conclusions of this work are analysed below.

## ***2.1 Responding to Culture and Context***

Clearly leadership styles are contingent on the context in which they are applied. But they also depend on the ability of the individual's diagnostic skills and judgement to know what style to adopt and when to adapt their style to suit the circumstances. This influence of culture and context on leadership styles is highlighted in the recent research into NGO leadership in South Asia (see for example Smillie & Hailey, 2001) or sub-Saharan Africa (see for example Fowler et al., 2002; James, 2005a). The conclusions are supported by the findings of researchers analysing the characteristics of leadership styles of African managers generally. Mintzberg (2006) refers to what he calls their 'engaging' management style, while Jackson (2004a) highlights the importance of a 'humanist' style in the African cultural context.

Any understanding of the role and performance of NGO leaders must incorporate the environment in which they work. Recent research into NGO leaders in Kenya, Malawi and Uganda highlights the way in which they operate simultaneously in three different worlds – the global aid world, the urban context in which they live and work, and the rural village setting where many of their extended family still live (James, 2005a). This research reveals how NGO leaders have to adapt to new leadership roles, the stresses arising from pressure of work, and the demands of organisational crises – commonly around financial shortfalls, internal conflicts or tensions between the staff and the Board. Kaplan (2002) concludes that the unrealistic and artificial demands placed by aid donors adds to the pressure faced by local NGO leaders. The donor's emphasis on tight project schedules, over-hasty timeframes and quick results is both unrealistic, developmental bad-practice, and has a negative impact on the credibility and confidence of NGO leaders. Such demands have a detrimental effect on the ability of many NGO leaders to pursue long-term goals or develop a degree of financial sustainability.

NGO leadership also needs to be seen in the wider political and social context. For example, Fowler, Ng'ethe and Owiti's (2002) analysis of the determinants of civic

leadership in Kenya emphasised the importance of the wider political and institutional framework in determining the performance of NGO leaders. NGOs, as part of an active civil society, are inherently part of a wider political process. As a result their work is susceptible to politically-inspired restrictions. NGO leaders are commonly perceived as a political threat that needs to be subverted or removed. Apart from the impact of such tangible political concerns there is also the unquantifiable and intangible influence of caste, class, religion and culture.

There is an ongoing debate as to the influence of culture on management strategies and leadership styles (Jackson, 2004a). Contradictory evidence suggests that on the one hand, the more participative and collective leadership style that many NGOs espouse is shaped by the collectivist nature of society found in much of the developing world; on the other hand, the more autocratic approach adopted by individual NGO leaders is the product of the high power distance dimensions common to these cultures. For example, the evidence from research in Uganda suggests that such leaders face specific cultural pressures which, associated with the expectations of their staff, results in them playing a more paternalistic role than they might want to. However benign this role may be, it detracts from their ability to make hard decisions or play a more 'professional' managerial role (James et al., 2005). In turn this places individual leaders under great personal pressure. They have to meet the

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expectations and financial demands of family members, and manage the 'power distance' relations between themselves as managers and their staff. It has also been suggested that the paternalistic nature of many NGO leaders is a natural consequence of the high levels of commitment and shared sense of ownership common to many NGOs (Fowler, 1997).

The paternalistic nature of some leadership in the NGO sector is a matter of some concern. There are many anecdotal stories about the detrimental impact of paternalistic founder leaders, 'charismatic autocrats' or 'the guru syndrome'. On the one hand such leaders demonstrate drive and commitment, and a remarkable ability to mobilise people and resources; on the other hand they are criticised for dominating organisations, being unaccountable, and failing to adapt to changing circumstances. Chambers (1997) suggests that many NGO leaders achieve things through their 'guts, vision and commitment', but the way they use (or abuse) power is a 'disability' that jeopardises organisational effectiveness. He argues such charismatic leaders are 'vulnerable to acquiescence, deference, flattery and placation'. They are not easily contradicted or corrected. As a result they actively suffocate promising initiatives that may threaten their power base, relationships or position of patronage.

Despite these concerns most of the recent research into NGO leadership emphasises the significance of good leadership. An effective leader can transform an organisation

by providing direction, inspiring staff, mobilising new resources while still maintaining a clear organisational identity, and promoting shared values.

## **2.2 Working Relationships and Participation**

As has already been noted leadership behaviour is directly influenced by leaders' definitions of themselves in relation to their colleagues and work teams. As such leadership is not so much about individuals as it is about relationships. It is a dynamic process of mutual influence between leaders and followers. A noteworthy finding of the recent research among NGO leaders in Uganda has been the way in which leaders have embraced a more participatory leadership style. Traditionally dominant leaders are increasingly sharing decision-making with their staff and encouraging a more participatory culture in their organisations (James et al., 2005).

One of the paradoxical issues that research has uncovered concerns the way in which successful NGO leaders manage the tensions inherent in being a strong individual lead while still appearing to be highly participative and collegial in the way they manage. Many NGOs in the South espouse collective decision-making and participatory management, yet have clear hierarchies and accept strong leadership.

One paradoxical issue is the way in which successful NGO leaders manage the tensions inherent in being a strong individual lead while still appearing to be highly participative and collegial in the way they manage.

To some, the concepts of leadership and participation seem incompatible. Yet what has emerged is that strong leadership and participatory management can be complementary and compatible.

Research into South Asian NGOs shows that such 'participatory management' needs a particular mind-set and specific management competencies. First and foremost, it means that successful leaders must be able to listen, and must be able to respond to what is being said. They have to be adept at managing cross-functional teams and a range of decentralised operations. Their ability to lead such teams depends on their willingness and ability to listen, show empathy, and enter into meaningful dialogue, as well as their ability to inspire and convince the sceptical. Collective management and effective team working has been crucial to the success of such local NGO leaders, and they all acknowledged the importance of their colleagues in their success (Smiley & Hailey, 2001).

What is also striking from any review of this research is the different roles that such leaders have to play whatever the culture or context. Their success is determined by their ability to work in a participative manner, be comfortable with sharing their leadership role, and work in a collective style. As a result many NGO leaders have a chameleon-like ability to play different roles and adopt different leadership styles. Yet they are also capable of undertaking the most basic management tasks, as well as balancing the demands of different stakeholders in ways that do not compromise their individual identity and values. These 'development leaders' display an extraordinary

set of skills and competencies because of the complexity of the contexts in which they have to operate and the challenges they have to face.

### **3 NGO Leadership: Evolving Roles and Characteristics**

This section focuses on the key characteristics and competencies shared by NGO leaders. It explores some of the distinctive characteristics of women NGO leaders, and the particular competencies of NGO leaders facing extreme pressure or exceptional situations, such as those associated with the spread of HIV/AIDS. Above all, this section highlights the particular skills and competencies needed by such 'development leaders' to cope with the challenges they face.

#### **3.1 Competencies and Characteristics**

Typical of the competencies commonly associated with leadership are the ability of a leader to communicate vision or strategy, inspire teams, motivate individuals, and identify opportunities and initiate transformation. Recent research in the UK sponsored by ACEVO, which represents and supports the leaders of non-profit organisations in Britain, suggests that they exhibited an unusually broad range of competencies compared to leaders in the public and private sectors (Bolton & Abdy, 2003). They need a rare balance of inward-looking (management) and outward-looking (influencing) skills, with exceptional communication and networking skills, as well as resilience and emotional attachment.

This finding reflects the belief that effective leaders display high levels of 'emotional intelligence', and their performance is determined by their emotional maturity and ability to mobilise their emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2000). Emotional intelligence describes one's innate ability to feel, use, understand and learn from your own emotions and those of others and of groups. Those with high levels of emotional

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intelligence have an ability to motivate both themselves and others. Many effective leaders demonstrate high levels of self-awareness, are capable of self-management, are socially aware and are well able to manage a diverse range of relationships. Emotional intelligence represents the intangible aspects of leadership that are all so important.

Many international NGOs have created assessment tools that try to capture both hard skills and some of these softer, more intangible, attributes. For example, the International Federation of the Red Cross introduced an 'Effective Leadership Inventory' of over seventy questions both to elicit and to reinforce the leadership qualities the Federation believes its leaders will need to demonstrate in order to



ensure the continued success of the organisation. Similarly, the Save the Children Alliance has established a set of Leadership Standards that apply to all levels of the organisation, independent of function or country. The list of standards is self-measurable, and has been designed to encourage learning and self-improvement. It is based on the individual leader's ability to envision (create and communicate individual strategy), enable (identify and apply appropriate tools, processes, and people), empower (develop effective teams), and energise (communicate and inspire through personal leadership).

As was identified earlier, there is also a small but growing body of research whose findings give practical insights into the character and capabilities of NGO leaders in both Asia and Africa. For example, research in South Asia highlighted the distinct character and leadership style common to the leaders of large NGOs in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan (Smiley and Hailey, 2001). This research emphasised the crucial role of individual leaders in the development and growth of these organisations. The leaders studied had a highly personalised and distinctive leadership style. They appeared pragmatic, rational and aspirational. They also demonstrated a striking ability to balance competing demands on their time and energy with their own values and ambitions. They appeared both managerial and value-driven. They had clear and ambitious development aspirations, as well as an ability to understand and work with what resources they had and the volatile environment in which they found themselves.

Such 'development leaders' could be characterised as being value-driven, knowledge-based, and responsive. In practice this meant that they had:

- **a clear vision and a firm personal value-set.** This gave them a strong sense of commitment to helping the rural poor that they were able to share with, and use to inspire, others.
- **a willingness to learn and experiment.** This meant they were comfortable applying new technologies or developing innovative organisational forms, and keen to draw on science or other sources of applied or professional knowledge.
- **a curiosity and ability to scan the external environment.** As a consequence they were able to track changes, analyse trends, and identify ways to respond to changing circumstances.
- **strong communication and interpersonal skills.** These enabled them to motivate staff and engage with a cross-section of society in a proactive and positive manner.
- **the ability to balance competing demands** on their time and manage the pressures from a range of different stakeholders.

A recent study of NGO leaders in sub-Saharan Africa identified similar characteristics, notably the ability to balance the demands of different stakeholders – including donors, local communities, and their extended family – a determination to lead, and a

willingness to embrace change (James, 2005a). These leaders also demonstrated a natural aptitude for managing people – which in the context of, for example, many Ugandan NGOs meant the creation of a ‘functional family’. This idea of the NGO as a family unit and the NGO leader as the head of the family is most apparent when looking at the role and character of many women who lead NGOs.

### **3.2 Women NGO Leaders**

All the evidence suggests that women who attain leadership roles in NGOs have had to develop specific coping strategies to deal with the cultural and social pressures they face. It is commonly claimed that they bring a mix of skills learnt in the home. There appears to be some expectation that women NGO leaders adopt a motherly comforting role, rather than a strong, forthright style. The staff expect to be able to rely on such leaders, who will comfort them in times of adversity and resolve the problems they face. In many ways women leaders have been forced by others to adopt this matriarchal or ‘paternalistic’ leadership style (see typology in Section 2). This is well exemplified in the way that the leader of the Uganda Women Concern Ministries is referred to as their mother who knows everything, and is the ‘candle’ for the organisation. Yet despite all this when a woman performs well she starts being labelled a ‘man’ (*kyakula ssajja – she is manly*), an expression commonly applied to women activists (James et al., 2005).

While all leaders face challenges, there are some issues that are particular to female leaders. New research into women NGO leaders in Africa has highlighted the pressures such women face, and analysed the women’s characters and the roles they perform. These include their feeling of inadequacy because of a lack of formal management or leadership training, and their feeling that they need to over-perform

Women leaders face cultural expectations as to their gender roles. In practice this can mean that they face prejudice, harassment, family pressures, and have limited career expectations.

to ensure promotion or be appointed to leadership positions. Many of these issues arise because of the way women have been traditionally socialised to see men as key decision-makers, and the way most girls are brought up, for example in East Africa, to submit to male authority – first to fathers and brothers and at a later age to husbands. There are well-documented examples of how girls were

actively discouraged by their parents from finishing school, or of women whose career ambitions were undermined by the attitude of their husbands (James et al., 2005).

As a consequence women leaders face cultural expectations as to their gender roles. In practice this can mean that they face prejudice, harassment, and family pressures, and have limited career expectations. Although this state of affairs is gradually changing in many parts of the developing world, women leaders have had to adopt particular coping strategies and proactively manage social expectations so as to be accepted in leadership positions. Women in such leadership positions have had to

learn how to balance their leadership role with deep-rooted attitudes about the role of women in a society traditionally dominated by men. This often means that they not only have to develop a degree of political astuteness so as not to aggravate tensions by keeping a relatively low profile where appropriate, but they also have to maintain higher moral or ethical standards than their male counterparts to ensure that they are not open to accusations of malpractice or conflict of interest. In light of all these pressures it is understandable why such women have developed a range of 'engendered' coping strategies to work in such male-dominated societies and handle the demands they face.

### **3.3 HIV/AIDS and NGO Leaders**

In any analysis of the dynamics and dimensions of NGO leadership, it is clear that some leaders work in environments that are not just changing rapidly but are largely out of control. This is most apparent in societies being devastated by HIV/AIDS, where local NGOs and their leadership are having to develop a range of new strategies and skills to enable them to continue to function. Interestingly these strategies and skills are similar to those displayed by NGOs working in conflict zones or at times of extreme political upheaval.

The impact of HIV on leaders *infected* by the virus is increasingly obvious and distressing, and yet the impact on leaders *affected* by the virus is more widespread and subversive. Leaders, in countries like Malawi, are not just leaders in their organisations (and having to bear the weight of HIV in their workplace), but are also leaders in their extended and rapidly extending families (James and Mullins, 2004). There is a close relationship between personal identity, the community, and a wider network of relationships and responsibilities (Jackson, 2004). Such local leaders, therefore, cannot divorce themselves from their societal and family roles and people's expectations of them. Research in Uganda, Kenya and Malawi has examined the

In societies being devastated by HIV/AIDS, local NGOs and their leadership are having to develop a range of new strategies and skills to enable them to continue to function.

problems caused by the loss of key staff and the subsequent loss of skills and experience (James et al., 2005). Resources invested in key individuals were lost, staff development plans were in disarray, staff faced increasing work loads, and consequently morale was low and the organisations' culture threatened.

The pressures these leaders have to deal with include the impact on their family life and emotional wellbeing, physical exhaustion, as well as the financial costs and the drain on their time. Leaders can spend a significant proportion of their time and income on visiting sick relatives and friends. In Malawi, some are expected to give up more than 10 per cent of their working time to family funerals. It is not unusual for NGO leaders to go into debt in order to pay for these funerals. They are also the ones expected to take into their households the orphaned children of their siblings, and

then to educate them. Not surprisingly such expenses, on top of normal 'living' expenses, can create very serious financial worries.

This has a considerable impact on leaders' capacity to lead and manage. Many NGO leaders in Sub-Saharan Africa are close to burnout. It is impossible to appreciate fully the impact of the personal trauma and depth of grief in countries where so many family members are sick and dying. This emotional, physical and financial exhaustion is affecting their performance as leaders. They have less time and patience to consult, manage and motivate their staff. As a result they may make hasty and top-down decisions out of frustration, rather than careful thought.

Faced with these pressures and the impact on personal health and well-being, local leaders are beginning to devise coping strategies. These include managing family expectations of what they can contribute, risking social ostracism by being more selective in what funerals to attend, and insisting that the cultural funeral and mourning processes be shortened. None of these changes are easy, but leaders are seeing them as the only way they can balance the competing demands of their professional lives with their personal lives.

This brief review of some of the issues and challenges affecting NGO leaders, whether they be as a result of traditional attitudes, the impact of HIV-AIDS on their work, or just the hassles associated with organisational change, highlights the importance of developing the confidence and competencies of NGO leaders. These 'development leaders' work in difficult circumstances with limited resources. They face personal pressures and have to balance the competing demands of different stakeholders. How do they learn to do this? Where do they develop the insights and understanding to handle these competing pressures? These are some of the challenges that those designing and running leadership development programmes have to address.

### **3.4 NGO Leadership and Change**

As has already been noted, strong leadership is most needed in times of change when organisations are experiencing rapid growth or operating in a volatile environment. The specific challenges for women leaders and NGO staff coping with the spread of HIV/AIDS confirms this. NGO leaders clearly respond in different ways, but one common aspect is the way that they combine their idealism with hard analysis, technical expertise, and professionalism – while at the same time being able to communicate a vision and motivate a range of staff, stakeholders and beneficiaries. As identified in the last section, NGO leaders demonstrate a chameleon-like ability to balance competing demands and a diversity of roles according to the circumstances and the individuals involved; for example, balancing their personal vision with the practical needs of local communities, as well as the demands of donors or the vested interests of local politicians.

But it should also be noted that many NGO leaders have built their reputation by effecting change in very traditional, static, even paralysed, communities. In other words they are the source of change, and the cause of instability. Such 'catalytic' leaders (see the typology in Section 2) are change agents who promote innovation and mobilise new resources. This is well-exemplified in Uphoff and Esmans (1998) review of 'successful' rural development programmes, which highlighted the catalytic role of key individuals in leadership positions. These individuals played a crucial role in initiating change and guiding innovation; a role made somewhat easier because they were 'outsiders' themselves, coming as they did from outside the rural community studied, and as a result better able to promote new thinking or argue for change. Uphoff and Esman describe this group of unusually able and motivated individuals as 'development entrepreneurs' or 'social innovators'.

The capacity to play different roles and balance competing demands, as well as develop strategies that enable them to cope with the exigencies of complex and difficult external environments appears to be one of the hallmarks of many successful NGO leaders. Interestingly this echoes the findings of the ACEVO survey of non-profit leaders in the UK, who demonstrated an unusually broad range of competencies to handle the demands of competing stakeholders and organisational change.

One consequence of this interest in the role of individual leaders in promoting change is that there is greater awareness of the need for these individuals to become more self-aware and change their own behaviour and attitudes if genuine change is to take place. In other words leaders have to change themselves, not just try to change the organisations. As Nelson Mandela famously commented 'you can never change society if you have not changed yourself'.

'the bottom line is that they (leaders) cannot change the organisation unless they change themselves'

*(Quinn, 2000)*

Research in both the private and non-profit sectors reinforces the point that such personal change is crucial.

For example, Quinn (2000: 116) notes that 'the bottom line is that they (leaders) cannot change the organisation unless they change themselves'. Edwards and Fowler (2002: 42) writing about developments in civil society note that 'it is rarely possible to generate substantial change in human behaviour simply by altering the rules and institutions that govern our lives. The missing ingredient is personal change which acts as a well spring of change in other areas'. While James (2003) also noted the way behavioural changes are preceded by highly personal internal changes in his research among local NGO leaders in Malawi. The crucial question is how to ensure such personal change occurs? This challenge seems to lie at the heart of the work of those designing and running leadership development programmes.

## 4 The Challenge of Leadership Development

This section focuses on some of the issues which need to be considered by those involved in developing a new generation of leaders. There is now much greater recognition of the importance of personal change, individual empowerment, experiential learning, and face to face support. Leadership Development Programmes (LDPs) have evolved over time from formal, structured, one-off training courses to more process-based, experiential programmes with an emphasis on personal development and self-directed learning. This shift reflects frustration with the limited impact of traditional one-off training courses with little real follow-up, and a greater appreciation that more holistic, self-learning programmes spread over time are better able to develop personal confidence and new leadership competencies.

The varied challenges which NGOs are up against have focused attention on how to develop a new generation of NGO leaders. In practical terms this is reflected in the increased investment in LDPs. For example, Save the Children Fund is in the process of identifying core leadership competencies for its senior staff, and is currently developing in-house leadership development courses. Similarly the Organisation Development Department of the International Federation of the Red Cross has introduced a series of leadership development workshops for the senior staff and Board members of different Red Cross societies. CARE, and a consortium of US-based NGOs, are developing a virtual NGO university (LINGO – Learning for International NGOs) whose initial programmes will focus on NGO leadership development. These are not just one-off initiatives but part of a growing awareness of the importance of developing the role and skills of NGO leaders (Lewis 2001; Smillie & Hailey 2001, Hailey & James 2004, James 2005a).

### 4.1 Empowerment and Transformation

The primary purpose of any NGO-based LDP is to develop a new generation of NGO leaders. All the indicators are that not enough talented natural leaders are either attracted to, or remain in, the sector. Recent research suggests that one of the biggest challenges facing the non-profit sector is the dearth of leaders – a problem that is only going to get worse as the sector expands (Tierney, 2006). The task of any LDP is to both mobilise existing talent but also to develop and motivate new leaders – in part by helping ordinary managers or administrators to become effective leaders. So LDPs prepare people to play roles beyond their normal experience or frame of reference. One measure of the success of any LDP is to what degree it helps transform personal behaviour and change attitudes.

Such personal transformation is dependent on greater self-awareness and willingness to engage in new ways of working or thinking. Raising awareness and promoting personal change is therefore a crucial component of any successful LDP. Unfortunately too many NGO capacity building programmes have overlooked this

obvious fact. They have focused too much on organisational and institutional issues rather than trying to promote changes to the attitude and behaviour of individual leaders. One implication of the current interest in emotional intelligence, as well as team-based or collective leadership, is the need to develop competencies that promote collaboration and networking, but also which ensure real personal change. This belief in the importance of emotional intelligence and individual change lies at the heart of the approach adopted by Vision Quest and its work with local NGOs in Southern Africa.

### **The Vision Quest Experience: Learning About Leadership Development in Malawi<sup>2</sup>**

The Vision Quest approach is rooted in the belief that change has to start from within and leaders can only change their organisation if they can change themselves. It is designed to help participants think through their values and vision and develop a clear sense of their own identity. The help offered to local NGO leaders by the South African-based Vision Quest exemplifies many of the best attributes of a personalised and process-based leadership development programme geared to changing attitudes and developing new solutions to old problems. The programme emphasises the leader as a human being, and helps them identify what they personally want to be.

Vision Quest strongly believes that behavioural change only really takes place when the learning experience is both intellectual and emotional. The programme creates time and space not only for busy leaders to reflect, but also to challenge themselves, in the belief that the more that leaders become aware of their strengths and weaknesses and can develop strategies to work with these, then the more effective they will be. To achieve this, Vision Quest use a variety of learning methodologies including:

- Triads (small groups of three people discuss set questions or specific problems)
- Journaling (individual reflections and plans are written in personal journals)
- Stories (using narrative stories to illustrate issues or theories)
- Mentoring Pairs (two participants discuss personal issues, reflections and plans)
- Physical Exercise (daily sessions to help unwind and relieve stress)

As with many of the more respected leadership programmes they take a holistic approach to the individual, and so look at different elements of the personal state – the socio-emotional, the physical, the spiritual and the mental, and the linkages between these. But fundamental to the success of this programme is that it provides hope, and helps individuals to identify the core purpose of their life. This is referred to as their quest. This process helps them generate a clearer sense of their own identity, which in turn enables them to balance external demands without compromising their core values.

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<sup>2</sup> See Praxis Note 17, James 2005. Can be downloaded from:  
[www.intrac.org/pages/PraxisNote17.html](http://www.intrac.org/pages/PraxisNote17.html)

This focus on individualised self-development raises the question as to whether leadership behaviours and competencies can actually be developed through some form of taught training course. Or do we just accept that leadership is an innate characteristic that some individuals are lucky enough to be born with and which can merely be refined – like the natural balance that a gymnast has or the sense of perspective that a great artist enjoys. The consensus today is that while some leadership qualities can be developed, there are some personal characteristics that are less amenable to change through a leadership development process (drive, perseverance, emotional resilience, etc). Thus we need to accept that LDPs cannot develop the ‘complete leader’, but they can go a long way in developing key leadership skills and behaviours.

Some skills cannot be taught in the traditional sense of the word, but can be developed through promoting greater self-awareness and generating some insight into the impact of personal behaviour or leadership style on others.

Some of these skills cannot be taught in the traditional sense of the word, but can be developed through promoting greater self-awareness and generating some insight into the impact of personal behaviour or leadership style on others. Experience suggests that such insights can best be developed through some process that

builds on participants’ own experience, and provides feedback through mentoring and coaching sessions, 360-degree appraisals, learning sets, or team building exercises. 360 degree is an increasingly popular feedback mechanism, as it enables individuals to gauge the attitudes and perceptions of their colleagues (superiors, peers and subordinates) as to their management style and behaviour in a systematic and facilitated manner. It acts as a reality check based on external sources, but for it to be effective it needs to be administered by trained facilitators. If badly administered it is not worth doing, because it alienates participants, creates artificial tensions between work colleagues, and casts doubt on the efficacy of other appraisal or feedback mechanisms. But if done well it can be of immense value in raising self-awareness and acting as a catalyst for personal change.

## **4.2 Practical Experience and Strategic Reality**

One of the challenges for those involved in such capacity building work is how to design interventions that will develop NGO leaders who can thrive in, and not just cope with, the complex environment in which most NGOs operate. There is also greater appreciation of the role that leaders play in organisational change. As a result those in leadership positions have to gain insights into both the context in which they operate as well as the organisational challenges facing local NGOs. LDPs need to develop an understanding of these strategic challenges, and help participants become more strategic in their thinking and entrepreneurial in their actions. The current interest in social entrepreneurship has highlighted this dimension of leadership development work. Successful LDPs ought therefore to be rooted in the practical experience and strategic reality of those running CBOs and NGOs, but also



incorporate the findings of recent research in this area – as shown in the conclusions outlined in the following box:

### **Realities of Change: Understanding How African NGO Leaders Develop**

Praxis Paper 6<sup>3</sup> analyses the constraints and challenges that NGO leaders face, including the impact of their 'congested' lives, and the implications of the different models and styles of leadership adopted. The authors conclude that effective LDPs must address these constraints by:

- Assisting leaders to work out their own coherent concept of leadership and analysing what style or behaviour is most appropriate to the local culture and context.
- Helping leaders deal with the issues arising because of their busy lives by identifying the diverse roles they are expected to play and what strategies they need adopt to cope with these diverse stakeholders and external pressures.
- Exploring an empowering style of leadership which allows for greater involvement of staff and 'followers' in decision-making, negotiations and implementation.
- Addressing the issue of leadership succession by analysing future scenarios for the organisation and what skills and competencies would be needed, and identifying potential leaders who might possess these or could develop them.

The evidence suggests that appropriate and relevant LDPs would consist of an integrated package of training, mentoring and coaching, peer support networks, exposure visits, attachments and sabbaticals. These would not just develop participants' skills and knowledge-base, but also allow space for reflection, help individuals to challenge the status quo and develop solutions, as well as provide facilitated support, feedback, and follow-up. Such programmes would use a mix of approaches intended to generate greater self-awareness, explore personal values, and identify coping strategies to handle the demands and pressures commonly faced by NGO leaders.

Based on this analysis capacity building providers need to:

- Adjust the content and process of LDPs to reflect factors that inhibit, and factors that change in the local context
- Develop the skills and resources to deliver highly personalised programmes which incorporate a range of approaches and techniques, including the provision of credible and ongoing coaching or mentoring
- Challenge donors on the type of LDPs they support, and their role in leadership change
- Practise what they preach by having constructive feedback, time of reflection, and placing values at the heart of their own capacity building practice.

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<sup>3</sup> See Praxis Paper 6, James et al. 2005. Can be downloaded at:  
[www.intrac.org/pages/PraxisPaper6.html](http://www.intrac.org/pages/PraxisPaper6.html)

### **4.3 Methods and Approaches**

Leadership development therefore isn't about a single training event, it is about a process that incorporates a range of activities including<sup>4</sup>:

- coaching and mentoring
- self-assessment questionnaires
- psychometric testing (such as Myers Briggs or 16PF),
- journaling and narrative description
- photographs and video diaring
- cases and simulation exercises
- specialist workshops and seminars
- learning sets and peer group support
- internships, attachments, secondments and observation exercises.

This mix of inputs and approaches not only provides participants with specific skills and experiential learning, but also insights and feedback that help promote greater self-awareness and self-confidence in their role as leaders. Of the activities identified it is apparent that coaching and mentoring play an increasingly important role in leadership development – to the extent that it is commonly expected that most individuals in leadership positions should have the support of some kind of coach or mentor.

Coaching is a self-reflective process facilitated by an external coach on a regular basis (say every two months) in which day-to-day experiences are drawn on as a learning opportunity, and where options are explored or choices identified. Mentoring is when a long-term relationship is developed with a senior or experienced colleague, geared to the provision of support and guidance. It is arguable that once senior managers reach a certain stage in their career, attending formal training courses has less impact, and that as a number of INGOs have found, including Oxfam and the Red Cross, personalised support through coaching has more value. Mentoring and coaching should not just be seen as a 'luxury' enjoyed by a few managers in large, well-funded development agencies, but something that has genuine value at all levels and in all types of CBO and NGO. This point is well exemplified in the following box which outlines the way the South African NGO, Barnabus Trust, uses coaching to support the work of local community-based organisations in South Africa.

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<sup>4</sup> A more detailed description of these activities can be found in Appendix 1.

### **Mentoring Leaders of HIV/AIDS Community-Based Organisations<sup>5</sup>**

The leaders of community-based organisations (CBOs) play a particularly important role in local development. They are motivated, dynamic individuals who are close to the local community, have a real feeling for their needs, and an understanding of how best to mobilise local resources. But many lack management skills and have had limited education or formal training. As a result the CBOs with which they are involved are highly vulnerable and fragile entities. Problems go unresolved, conflicts arise and money disappears or runs out because of poor planning or inadequate financial systems. Money invested in training has often been wasted because courses rarely meet the real needs of CBOs or address the unique pressures on CBO leaders. This is especially true for AIDS-related CBOs who face particularly difficult and sensitive challenges providing care and support to a highly vulnerable group.

The South African Barnabus Trust has tried to address this issue by providing a package of support including leadership mentoring. The leaders of local CBOs are coached (or what they refer to as mentoring) by a trained and experienced facilitator on a weekly or bi-monthly basis for a two-year period. These sessions cover everything from personal concerns to developing strategic plans, and the mentor systematically works through different parts of their life and work. The sessions are based on a combination of appreciative enquiry and participatory situational analysis exercises. These are geared to answering such questions as where are we now? Where do we want to be? What is preventing us from getting there?

This experience suggests that coaching and mentoring is a long process in which the leaders of CBOs are given a safe place to explore sensitive issues, analyse problems, learn from mistakes or conflicts, and evaluate failures in the context of a supportive relationship. The Trust also monitors the progress of the CBO with which they are working, and using a timeline lists achievements or important events; key benchmarks so that they can assess whether the mentored organisation has progressed to a new level. Indicators of such progress include: a new stability, reduced conflicts, enhanced financial security, the introduction of effective financial systems or planning processes, or more effective leadership or governance structures.

The mentors themselves need to be credible and respected. There is no point in choosing a young, highly qualified mentor whose lack of experience and age means that they will not be respected or heard. Clearly language skills are essential, but so are empathy, insight and humility. As both coaching and mentoring is itself a stressful process the facilitators need support and are given opportunities for regular debriefing. But above all they need to be experienced ('the more you do the better you become') and emotionally stable ('keep their own self-esteem separate from the progress of the CBOs they are working with').

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<sup>5</sup> See Praxis Note 24, Symes, 2006. Can be downloaded at:  
[www.intrac.org/pages/PraxisNote24.html](http://www.intrac.org/pages/PraxisNote24.html)

International experience suggests that there is a move to support such developmental processes with new web-based e-learning opportunities. Such e-learning initiatives are attractive because of their flexibility and low cost to deliver internationally. But there are commonly high attrition rates with web-based programmes. The success of such distance-learning initiatives depends on regular feedback and intermittent face to face contact, as well as access to the wider 'communities of practice'. It seems that because of the innovative nature of many e-learning initiatives, participants need to work at their own speed, and slowly build their confidence in the process and the technology involved. It is not a process that can be forced or imposed.

Current thinking suggests that leadership development should be seen as an emergent, experiential and bespoke process

In conclusion, the current thinking suggests that leadership development should be seen as an emergent, experiential and bespoke process. LDPs should be seen as providing a safe space to explore new issues, receive feedback and reflect on personal performance and behaviour. Because of the emphasis on experiential learning, many successful programmes incorporate a planned programme of secondments, attachments and job rotation. As such they should not be seen in the same light as traditional training courses, but more as a mix of methodologies that help generate self-awareness, build confidence, analyse options and explore ways of implementing alternative solutions.

## 5 Leadership Development: Assessing its Impact

### A Successful Short Course on Leadership

Six most important words: 'I admit I made a mistake'

Five most important words: 'I am proud of you'

Four most important words: 'What is your opinion'

Three most important words: 'If you please'

Two most important words: 'Thank you'

One most important word: 'We'

Least important word: 'I'

(Adair, 1983)

This list of important words may appear trite, but there is an element of truth in it, as it highlights the highly personalised nature of leadership development. But it does not answer some of the crucial questions, such as: what do potential leaders actually need or want from such a course? What will excite or motivate them? How successful and effective are such programmes and what impact do they have? This section offers a brief review of the issues around assessing the impact and effectiveness of LDPs, and how their success is measured.

### 5.1 Impact and Effectiveness

One of the striking things that arises from any review of the research on leadership development is how little specific evidence there is that LDPs actually lead to enhanced individual performance or have any direct impact on organisational performance (Mabey, 2002; Kellogg Foundation, 2002). Researchers suggest that this is because it is difficult to measure changes in personal competencies or 'soft social skills', and there is a lack of agreement as to what measure of success to use, as well as the difficulties of undertaking longitudinal studies of individual leaders.

However, the billions of dollars that are invested globally each year in LDPs suggests that many organisations feel they do have a beneficial impact – even if it is hard to identify or measure. It is evident that higher performing companies spend a higher proportion of their training budgets on personal and people management skills than less profitable companies. There is evidence that well designed LDPs can improve employee attitudes (motivation, morale, and so on), and have greater impact in times of rapid change, and as such this kind of intervention is a more worthwhile investment in times of dynamic change than in times of consolidation and stability (Burgoyne et al., 2004).

## 5.2 Good Practice and Lessons Learnt

It appears that the effectiveness of LDPs depends on a number of different factors including the past experience of the participants, their preferred learning styles, degree of motivation, and the ethos of learning in the organisation in which they work. Programmes are perceived to be more successful if they allow participants to incorporate their own experience, integrate an element of personal discovery, allow time for personal reflection, and expose participants to new ideas or developing trends (Burgoyne et al., 2004). Any LDP should therefore not be seen as a stand-alone event but an ongoing process of personal development that is fully integrated with other staff development strategies. Participation should be seen to enhance career prospects and be seen as part of a wider career development strategy. In other words LDPs should be designed to enable individuals to realise their career ambitions rather than merely exist to meet organisational goals. They should therefore be seen as an investment in promoting talent, and as such have the explicit support of the board and senior managers.

Experience tells us that leadership development is an ongoing process. Effective LDPs are emergent, experiential and bespoke. The process is highly personal and so needs to be customised to the needs of the individual. It should be geared to developing

LDPs need to focus both on the values and on the identity of individual leaders and their relationships within the context in which they work

personal confidence as well as creating the new mindsets needed by those in leadership positions. It is a creative and catalytic process that effects change. It is also a highly sensitive (at times confidential) process that needs to be facilitated by an external specialist, and supported with time and commitment on the part of the organisation.

LDPs therefore need to focus both on the values and on the identity of individual leaders and their relationships within the context in which they work, thus enabling them to better understand themselves and the environment in which they work. This will help empower them to respond proactively to the challenges they face, as well as become more strategic in their thinking and entrepreneurial in their actions. Effective leadership development is therefore not an isolated process but one that is integrated with the organisation's learning strategy and human resource policy. There should be regular follow-up and feedback from different sources (e.g. 360-degree feedback, self-assessment questionnaires, coaching and mentoring). Leadership development should be based around a structured and systematic programme of activities that focuses on the personal and practical priorities of those involved and reflects the cultural and institutional environment in which they work.

For such programmes to be credible the effectiveness of these programmes needs to be monitored and the performance of the participants tracked. They must also be supported and endorsed by all those in leadership positions in the organisation. Such

leaders cannot expect staff to participate in such programmes unless they themselves participate, and demonstrate their own commitment to the process. But above all the success of programmes depends on how well participants actually engage in the process, and find the materials and approaches appropriate and accessible. All the evidence suggests that active engagement in the process will lead to personal changes that will have a wider impact on the rest of the organisation.

### **5.3 Research Priorities for Successful Leadership Development**

One of the outcomes of the work on assessing the effectiveness and success of different LDPs is the recognition that we need to know more about NGO leaders, their roles and their personal needs, and how they can be identified and developed. As a result it is imperative that we invest and encourage further research in the area of NGO leadership. Currently there is only a small body of applied research in this area. Much of this is focused on the experience of African and South Asian NGOs, and we need to know more about the role and character of NGO leadership in different contexts such as Latin America, South East Asia and Eastern Europe.

If there is to be any effective attempt to build the leadership capacity of the NGO sector we need to know more about how their leadership works, and what skills they use – when and why? How do such leaders encourage team working, promote learning, and empower their colleagues? How do they use participatory processes to spread information and knowledge, to build consensus around organisational objectives and vision, and to ensure that all stakeholders understand and respect the organisation's vision and purpose? What are the future trends in NGO leadership and what skills and competencies are needed by NGO leaders to respond to the challenges facing the sector?

If there is to be any effective attempt to build the leadership capacity of the NGO sector we need to know more about how their leadership works, and what skills they use – when and why?

What is the relationship between governance and leadership, and to what extent do NGO Boards have a leadership role? Researchers need also to go beyond the institutional elements of NGO leadership, they need to try to analyse what are the personal needs of individual leaders and understand how they can be helped on a personal level.

The answer to these questions will give us a more realistic insight into what are the characteristics and competencies of such 'development leaders'. We need these answers in order to help develop a new generation of NGO leaders who can build sustainable and effective NGOs which are marked by their vision and values, as well as being rooted in the communities with which they work.

There is also a need to develop a better understanding of the trends and developments in leadership thinking. What will be the impact of the growing interest

in the entrepreneurial nature of leadership, and the recasting of non-profit leaders as social entrepreneurs? There is interest in the way leaders promote new learning and use information and knowledge to bring about change or facilitate organisational transformation. The idea of the NGO leader as a 'learning leader' and a 'change agent' needs to be explored further. Also the networking role of NGO leaders needs to be better understood. Clearly they have a role as boundary spanners building inter-organisational contacts, developing alliances and coalitions, and managing external relations. But there is little appreciation of what competencies are needed to do this, and researchers need not only to identify good practice, but also to analyse the constraints on effective networking, as well as inter-organisational collaborations which have failed or were not worth the investment involved.

However, it should also be recognised that there are significant blocks to such research, and researchers need to develop ways of overcoming them. For example, the staff and volunteers of many NGOs are often unwilling to acknowledge the influence of any one individual, or accept the highly personal nature of NGO leadership. This is partly explained by the perception that the concept of leadership is antithetical to the participatory culture espoused by many NGOs. Consequently, they may be less than open to research in this area. Many of the staff and volunteers of non-profit organisations and NGOs believe they are more value-driven, participatory, and less reliant on senior managers than most businesses. As a result they are more likely to underplay the influence of any one individual leader. Allison (2002) even suggests that because non-profits give greater credence to ideas of equality and participatory democracy they only encourage and sponsor research that focuses on their values or charitable activities rather than research into the way they are led or the role of the executive leadership. Whether there is a bias against leadership research in the non-profit sector is debatable. But it is an issue that researchers need to address.



## 6 Leadership Development: The Future Challenges

Any commentary on the future role of NGO leaders or new approaches to leadership development will first have to come to grips with the changing nature of society and the breakdown of traditional social structures and values, and the impact of globalisation and technological advances. Organisations also face dramatic changes, partly because they will have to work in a more collaborative manner with partners or through networks, and partly because of the changing nature of work and the expectations of their workforce. Staff loyalty cannot be taken for granted, and leaders will increasingly have to defend their role and status, as well as justify how they 'won the right to lead'. Employees also expect increased flexibility in work practices, greater investment in staff development, and enhanced job satisfaction. In this context leadership is a shared responsibility. It is one based on openness, empathy, and integrity. Leaders are expected to have a wider knowledge base and an ability to work with multi-cultural teams or in different cultural contexts, as well as communicate or negotiate with a wide range of individuals or stakeholders.

In this changing environment leadership is viewed as the key organisational asset. Leaders will have to make sense of uncertainty and develop the skills and energy to

Leaders are expected to have a wider knowledge base and an ability to work with multi-cultural teams or in different cultural contexts, as well as communicate or negotiate with a wide range of individuals or stakeholders.

manage unpredictable situations. Leaders will have to become increasingly adaptable and cope with the challenge of working in and across different cultures. They will also have to become more and more adept at working externally. The trend for NGOs to work in collaborative partnerships or in new consortiums means that NGO leaders will have to learn not just networking skills, but also the ability to negotiate

and resolve conflicts with a variety of different players from different backgrounds and cultures. They will therefore have to develop new competencies as networkers, coalition builders and boundary spanners. In this regard there will be greater emphasis on the qualities of adaptability and resilience, as well as judgement and analysis (particularly environmental scanning).

There is now enough awareness of the downside and dysfunctionality of 'strong' leadership. Increasingly leaders will be judged by the way they incorporate ethics and integrity into their work, and operate in a sufficiently participative way. This pressure for less of a top-down leadership style and a more collegial or participative approach means that individual leaders will have to be seen to be team-players and coalition-builders. They will have to have 'earned the right to lead', by having 'walked the talk' or 'led by example'. As such those in leadership positions will not only have to be more directly involved with colleagues and so be able to delegate responsibilities, but also actively listen and accept feedback, displaying openness, empathy, integrity and self-awareness.

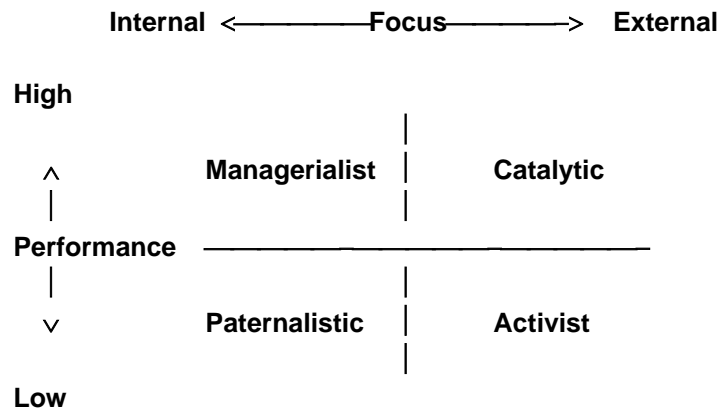
As we have seen there is a need for more research to better understand and identify the attributes and competencies NGO leaders should have to handle the demands they face in the future. This will also help identify the systems and processes that NGOs need to establish to ensure that the most suitable individuals are recruited to leadership positions and are equipped with the necessary attributes or competencies. This has implications for the way human resource strategies are implemented, the way that NGOs recruit and retain key staff and how they will develop the skills and competencies needed by the next generation of leaders.

It is also clear that leadership will not merely be measured on short-term performance results, but also on longer-term impact and the ability to handle the moral, ethical and social responsibilities that organisations are expected to take on. There will also be increasing scrutiny of their pro-poor stance, and the degree to which their work genuinely has an impact on the lives of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. There will be pressure for greater accountability, improved governance, and clearer strategic direction; in other words, calls for 'more and better leadership'. Consequently organisations will need to invest more time in developing their leadership capabilities, while leaders themselves will have to invest in their own personal development and greater self-awareness. This implies that they need to engage in more personalised leadership development work, and in particular be open to personal coaching or mentoring.

A crucial question will be 'what type of leader we are trying to develop'?

A crucial question will be what type of leader are we trying to develop? As has been reiterated throughout this paper not only is there a growing leadership deficit in the non-profit sector generally and a limited pool of leadership talent to draw on, but also little real understanding of what sort of leaders are needed in the future. One way to approach this is to use the typology of leadership set out earlier in this paper. Four potential leadership types were identified: 1) Paternalistic: 2) Activist: 3) Managerialist: and 4) Catalytic.

The question of how to assess what type of leader is best suited to the specific requirements of NGOs depends on, first, their ability to engage with the external world, and second, their skill at managing performance. These two criteria are crucial to ensuring the long-term sustainability and growth of any NGO in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The ability to engage with the external world is about building inter-organisational alliances and developing innovative ways of working with existing partners or new NGO consortia, as well as actively engaging in strategic networks. The ability to manage and encourage effective performance is as much about implementing change and transforming an organisation, as it is about managing staff, delegating responsibilities, or introducing new systems. The following matrix incorporates these elements, and suggests that 'catalytic' leaders with their ability to both engage with the external world and manage performance are the 'type' of leader that LDPs should be promoting and encouraging.



This matrix also implies that those leadership types that are inwardly focused or less concerned with managing effective performance, while worthwhile, are not types that should be actively encouraged in leadership programmes or on training courses. This model may help those involved in LDPs to visualise the criteria and dynamics of the type of leadership needed by NGOs in the future; in particular those NGOs which maintain their values, are strategic in their work, financially sustainable, and have an impact on the lives of those with whom they work.

## 7 Conclusions

All the evidence suggests that the leadership of NGOs is an issue of some importance. Such leaders can shape the destiny of not just the organisation itself, but also the communities with which they work. Effective NGO leaders do have a pro-poor agenda, and can impact the lives of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Unfortunately there is some concern about a growing 'leadership deficit', and where the next generation of leaders will come from and how they will be developed or trained.

### 7.1 Leadership Development: A Personal Challenge

Experience tells us that NGO leaders don't want or need traditional skill-based training programmes with fixed and finite structures. Instead they want flexible, personalised, process-based programmes that are geared to their own needs; programmes that are concerned with the strategic and operational issues they have to cope with on a daily basis. As a result there has been a move away from generic, skill-based traditional approaches to leadership training to more bespoke, process-based programmes designed to develop the untapped potential of individual leaders.

One consequence of this shift to a more personalised, process-based approach is that many different methods and techniques are employed, including coaching and mentoring, personal reflection, diarying, learning sets and peer group support. Thus the design of LDPs is increasingly based around a modular mix of inputs, with greater emphasis on experiential learning, personal learning or 'learning from within'.

This reflects the realisation that leadership development cannot be reduced to a checklist of characteristics or competencies to be worked on and ticked off. LDPs build

The design of LDPs is increasingly based around a modular mix of inputs, with greater emphasis on experiential learning, personal learning or 'learning from within'.

confidence, offer alternative solutions, and help individuals deal with issues of personal concern. As a result they incorporate techniques and group processes to help overcome common psychological barriers such as low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, fear of failure, and stress.

Another aspect that is often overlooked is the role of LDPs in attempting to alter unacceptable behaviour or attitudes. As has already been noted there are issues about the dark side of leadership behaviour. This is not just about the abuse of power for personal benefit, but also about the way autocratic behaviour displayed by some NGO leaders becomes 'addictive' and disempowering (James, 2005b). Such negative behaviour, which may have a highly detrimental effect on small organisations, can be addressed through self-awareness and consciousness-raising as well as ongoing mentoring or coaching. It also implies that LDP programmes should not merely be available to established leaders but also to a new

generation of potential leaders early in their careers, before inappropriate behaviour has become the norm, or autocratic habits have taken hold and solidified into addiction.

There is also a more sophisticated understanding of the range of social skills and leadership competencies that such programmes should be developing. This has been reinforced by an appreciation of the importance of emotional intelligence as a core competency. Research in the different dimensions of emotional intelligence has emphasised the centrality of the way we manage ourselves and our relationships, and brought out the role of a few fundamental capabilities (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skills) as crucial determinants of effective leadership (Goleman, 2000). There is therefore much greater appreciation that leadership development is a complex, dynamic and highly personal process. Leadership skills develop and evolve to suit the context and culture in which they operate. They cannot be simplistically transferred.

## **7.2 Leadership Development: A Capacity Building Priority?**

This Praxis Paper has identified some of the challenges that NGO leaders face, and concludes that they need a set of attributes above and beyond those commonly found. In particular they need integrity, personal strength, political acumen and managerial ability to balance the competing pressures they face as well as the judgement and insight to know what leadership style or strategies best suit the circumstances. They also need to maintain their personal values and deep-rooted contacts with the community within which they work. As a result they will develop a remarkable ability to adopt different management styles while remaining true to their values and aspirations, and where appropriate work in a participative and consensual manner.

The future of many NGOs depends on their ability to recruit and retain effective leaders who are self-starters, can inspire others, and have the ability to effect real

Leaders success as change agents depends on their ability to delegate work to talented colleagues so freeing time to build coalitions, develop strategic alliances, and work as 'boundary spanners' across organisational

change. Such 'catalytic' leaders (see typology in Section 2) have the ability to take a longer-term strategic view while balancing tough decisions as to strategic priorities with organisational values and identity. Their success as change agents depends on their ability to delegate work to talented colleagues so freeing time to build coalitions, develop strategic alliances, and work as 'boundary spanners' across organisational divides. Above all they are effective

and committed networkers who can lever up resources and enhance status and impact by actively engaging with external stakeholders and working with a range of partners.

It is also clear from any review of the research that leadership and management in the NGO sector is different from leadership in other sectors. NGOs are vulnerable to the exigencies of donors, the political sensitivities of governments, and the needs and imperatives of the local community. Development NGOs are susceptible to the unpredictable demands of an uncertain development environment or the consequences of such catastrophes as the global spread of HIV/AIDS or endemic poverty. The question for the future is how will such organisations find or develop a new generation of managers or leaders who can meet these challenges. Thus, leadership development needs to become a priority issue on the NGO agenda – an issue of central importance for all those concerned with capacity building.

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# Appendices

## ***Appendix 1: Approaches to Leadership Development***

These different approaches can be defined as the following:

### **Coaching and mentoring**

Coaching is a self-reflective process facilitated by an external coach on a regular basis (say every two months) in which day-to-day experiences are drawn on as a learning opportunity, and where options are explored or choices identified. Mentoring is when a long-term relationship is developed with a senior or experienced colleague, geared to the provision of support and guidance.

### **Self-assessment questionnaires**

These questionnaires help an individual think through their various choices and options by responding to a specially designed set of questions. They are normally followed up by some form of debriefing or feedback session and further coaching.

### **Psychometric testing**

There are a number of well-established instruments (such as Myers Briggs Type Indicator or 16PF) based around a standard set of questions that help provide insight into personal preferences and work practices. They are a powerful tool for raising self-awareness. The best-known instruments are well-established, well-researched and rigorous. Those providing feedback on these tests need to be well-trained and knowledgeable about the limitations and strengths of the different instruments.

### **Journaling and narrative description**

This is a technique which encourages a degree of personal reflection leading to self-learning. Participants either keep a diary or journal detailing their work day, the issues faced and possible lessons learnt, or, drawing on their insights into the way they and those they work with function, write a narrative story or drama that incorporates many of the elements of their working life. This is partly a self-reflective process, but sensitive feedback on the stories or journal can help draw out some key learnings.

### **Photographs and video diarying**

This is similar to the above approach but rather than using the written word, film and pictures are used to help explore issues and personal dilemmas – either at work or at home.

### **Cases and simulation exercises**

The use of case studies and critical incidents is a well-established part of leadership development. It allows participants to analyse practical examples and

propose options or new strategies. Similarly, simulation exercises are a practical experiential learning process. Normally these are built around group exercises and are as much about how individuals work together as how they analyse the problem posed or the task to be completed.

### **Specialist workshops and seminars**

Leadership Development Programmes may incorporate specialist workshops or seminars on specific issues. These are normally short inputs on a certain topic run by a specialist in the field. Their success depends on the way they are incorporated and integrated with the rest of the programme.

### **Learning sets and peer group support**

Small learning groups (or what for some unknown reason are commonly called 'triads') are a common component of LDPs. They are a 'red thread' that runs through the whole programme. They enable participants and peers to meet on a regular basis to discuss issues of direct relevance to their work or arising from the programme.

### **Internships, attachments, secondments and observation exercises**

Giving individuals the opportunity to work in a different context is a powerful learning tool, and many organisations now incorporate a planned programme of secondments, attachments and job rotation to facilitate such experiential learning.

# NGO Leadership Development

*By John Hailey*

NGO leaders often face extraordinary challenges – both at a personal and organisational level. These challenges are demanding, and distinct from those faced by governments or the for-profit sector.

NGO leaders are often isolated and unsupported. There is talk of a leadership deficit, because of the shortage of talented leaders and the growth of the non-profit sector generally. As a result there is some urgency in attempts to develop a new generation of leaders, and to provide relevant support to existing and future leaders. Leadership development programmes designed for NGO leaders must as a consequence incorporate best practice and current experience rather than rehashing tired, traditional approaches to leadership training.

This Praxis Paper examines the role of leaders and leadership in NGOs. It draws on the analysis of recent research into the characteristics of NGO leaders, and explores the challenges of designing leadership development programmes appropriate to the needs of NGOs. This paper identifies the elements of successful leadership development, and assesses the skills or competencies that need be developed.

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Postal address: PO Box 563, Oxford, OX2 6RZ

Registered and visiting address: Oxbridge Court, Old Fruiterers Yard, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0ES

Tel: +44 (0)1865 210851 Fax: +44 (0)1865 210852

Email: [info@intrac.org](mailto:info@intrac.org) Website: <http://www.intrac.org>

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